Muhammad Iqbal: From Poet to Philosopher to Political Visionary:

Introduction:

Mohammad Iqbal, 1877 to 1938, is largely, and not without reason, to be the founder of Pakistan although he did not live long enough to see his dream come true. Born in Sialkot and initially educated in the historical city of Lahore, the only thing remarkable about him was his poetic talent. No one would have thought that a brief three year stay in Europe would transform a thirty year old young man into a poet-philosopher, and then a political visionary, whose legacy has continued for over a century. Numerous books and articles have been written on his thought expressed in several collections of Urdu and Persian poetry, a series of lectures on the reconstruction of religious thoughts, stray

reflections and correspondence especially with Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who converted the poet's dream into the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and is remembered as Quaid-e-Azam, the great leader.
In this essay I will present an account how this transformation came about.

The Three Iqbals

Iqbal's intellectual journey was not abrupt but evolutionary. During his lifetime he passed through three overlapping stages: first as a patriotic poet, then as a philosopher of religion, and finally as a political visionary. His three major Urdu collections broadly reflect this progression:

- Bang-e-Dara – awakening and identity
- Bal-e-Jibril – reconstruction of the self and religious philosophy
- Zarb-e-Kalim – practical action and social reform

The Early Nationalist Poet (before 1905)

Before 1905 Iqbal's poetry was influenced by the Romantic English poets. He wrote about nature, and even translated some English poems into Urdu.
The very first poem of his first Urdu collection Bang-e-Dara is Himala.
اے ہمالہ اے فصیل کشور ہندوستاں
چومتا ہے تیری پیشانی کو جھک کر آسماں
Other popular poems include:
ایک مکڑا اور مکھی ایک پہاڑ اور گلہری ایک گائے اور بکری بچے کی دعا ہمدردی
These are some of the poems he adopted or translated from different sources، such as Tennyson, Cowper, Longfellow, Emerson
But we also find a young man facing an identity crisis.
اقبال بھی اقبال سے آگاہ نہیں ہے
کچھ اس میں تمسخر نہیں، واللہ نہیں ہے

At this stage Iqbal believed that Hindus and Muslims could together form a single Indian nation.

ترانۂ ہندی
سارے جہاں سے اچھا ہندوستاں ہمارا
ہم بلبلیں ہیں اس کی یہ گلستاں ہمارا
مذہب نہیں سکھاتا آپس میں بیر رکھنا
ہندی ہیں ہم وطن ہے ہندوستاں ہمارا
نیا شوالہ

سچ کہہ دوں اے برہمن گر تو برا نہ مانے
تیرے صنم کدوں کے بت ہو گئے پرانے

اپنوں سے بیر رکھنا تو نے بتوں سے سیکھا
جنگ و جدل سکھایا واعظ کو بھی خدا نے

تنگ آ کے میں نے آخر دیر و حرم کو چھوڑا
واعظ کا وعظ چھوڑا چھوڑے ترے فسانے

پتھر کی مورتوں میں سمجھا ہے تو خدا ہے
خاک وطن کا مجھ کو ہر ذرہ دیوتا ہے

آ غیریت کے پردے اک بار پھر اٹھا دیں
بچھڑوں کو پھر ملا دیں نقش دوئی مٹا دیں

سونی پڑی ہوئی ہے مدت سے دل کی بستی

آ اک نیا شوالہ اس دیس میں بنا دیں

دنیا کے تیرتھوں سے اونچا ہو اپنا تیرتھ
دامان آسماں سے اس کا کلس ملا دیں

ہر صبح اٹھ کے گائیں منتر وہ میٹھے میٹھے
سارے پجاریوں کو مے پیت کی پلا دیں

شکتی بھی شانتی بھی بھگتوں کے گیت میں ہے
دھرتی کے باسیوں کی مکتی پریت میں ہے
The shift in diction from Urdu to Hindi is palpably visible, indicating the poet's idea of one nation with people holding different religious ideologies living peacefully together. This was to change, and change drastically as we study his stay in Europe.
Europe: The Turning Point (1905–1908)

He wrote that his personality had two aspects: outer one is practical, while in the inner one is a philosopher and mystic living in a dream. He writes about his deep interest in philosophy, and going to Germany and

France, and learn whatever was available in Europe.
But there was something greater written in his destiny,
Europe transformed Iqbal more profoundly than any university education could.

While in Europe he saw the ills of the western civilization not just with his eyes but with his heart and intellect.
He analyzed four interconnected movements:

- industrialism
- imperialism
- nationalism
- materialism

These man made constructs were the building blocks of a Godless civilization.

When Allama Muhammad Iqbal arrived in Europe in 1905 to study at Cambridge, Heidelberg, and Munich, he was already an accomplished poet and scholar. However, he initially held a somewhat romantic view of

the West, advocating for Indian territorial nationalism in his early poetry.

His three-year stay in Europe (1905–1908) transformed his worldview. Observing Western society up close, he grew deeply disillusioned with its underlying socio-political machinery. He concluded that despite its brilliant scientific and technological achievements, modern European civilization was built on four interconnected, "Godless" constructs that stripped humanity of its spiritual essence.
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1. Materialism: The Metaphysical Foundation
Before arriving in Europe, Iqbal appreciated Western rationalism. However, living there exposed him to a society that had systematically divorced reason from divine spirituality.

- The Critique: Iqbal saw that European thought was dominated by a secular worldview that reduced human existence to physical matter and economic output.
- The Evolution: He realized that without a grounding in divine truth or moral accountability, human intellect becomes purely selfish. To Iqbal, materialism was the ultimate root of modern decay—it promised physical comfort but resulted in spiritual emptiness, leaving humanity "unaware of its true self" (Khudi).

2. Nationalism: The Ideological Idol
This was perhaps the most drastic shift in Iqbal's thinking. He went to Europe as a proponent of composite Indian nationalism and returned as one of its fiercest critics.

- The Critique: Iqbal observed that European nationalism wasn't merely love for one's homeland; it was a border-drawn dogma that defined identity by race,

geography, and language rather than shared moral principles.

- The Evolution: He recognized that modern nationalism acts as a replacement for religion—creating tribalism, xenophobia, and inevitable conflict between nation-states. He famously referred to territorial nationalism as the newest idol carved by modern civilization, directly opposing the universal, spiritual brotherhood (Ummah) taught by Islam.

- ان تازہ خداؤں میں بڑا سب سے وطن ہے
جو پیرہن اس کا ہے وہ مذہب کا کفن ہے

3. Imperialism: The Political Outcome
For Iqbal, imperialism was not an accidental byproduct of Western power, but the natural

political expression of a nationalist, materialist worldview.

- The Critique: Seeing European powers carve up the East under the guise of a "civilizing mission," Iqbal saw through the rhetoric. He observed that Western democracy at home relied on the subjugation and resource-stripping of foreign lands abroad.

- The Evolution: He came to view European political systems as hypocritical machinery—wrapped in the attractive language of "freedom" and "democracy," but operating as a cover for colonial exploitation.

4. Industrialism: The Economic Engine

While in industrial Europe, Iqbal observed the rise of unfettered capitalism and mass production.

- The Critique: He witnessed how industrial capitalism reduced human beings to mere machine cogs. It prioritized profit over soul, creating deep class divisions, urban alienation, and the exploitation of the working class by an elite few.
- The Evolution: Iqbal argued that industrialism stripped labor of its human dignity. While he valued technological progress, he saw that industrialism divorced from ethical limits turns human productivity into a form of economic enslavement.

The Synthesis: A "Godless Civilization"
Iqbal connected these four concepts as a self-reinforcing chain:
Materialism⟶Nationalism⟶Imperialism⟶Industrialism

1. Materialism rejects divine moral limits.

2. Denied a higher spiritual purpose, humanity divides itself via Nationalism.

3. Driven by national self-interest and greed, strong nations turn to Imperialism to dominate others.

4. Industrialism fuels this machine with weapons, economic exploitation, and mass production.

He wrote a poem March 1907
یار مغرب کے رہنے والو خدا کی بستی دکاں نہیں ہے
کھرا جسے تم سمجھ رہے ہو وہ اب زر کم عیار ہوگا

تمہاری تہذیب اپنے خنجر سے آپ ہی خودکشی کرے گی
جو شاخ نازک پہ آشیانہ بنے گا ناپائیدار ہوگا
It has been assumed that poem is based upon a dream, prophesying the World War One.

What March 1907 Actually Represented

Rather than a sleeping dream, March 1907 marks a turning point in Iqbal's conscious waking worldview.
Written near the end of his time at Cambridge and Heidelberg, the poem captures the exact moment Iqbal shed his earlier romantic notions of Western modernity and territorial nationalism. He realized that a civilization rooted strictly in secular materialism was fundamentally unstable and destined for self-destruction. It represents his declaration of purpose: to wake up the global Muslim community (Ummah) and act as the "marching bell" (Bang-i-Dara) for a new spiritual renaissance

By the time Iqbal returned to India in 1908, his focus had pivoted completely. He realized that the East could not liberate itself by simply copying Western modernity. Instead, he dedicated the rest of his life to constructing an alternative framework: one that absorbed the West's scientific vitality while remaining

anchored in the spiritual, moral, and unified worldview of Islam.

The third part of Bang-e-Dara, from 1908 onwards, starts with a poem بلاد اسلامیہ that shows clearly the shift in the poet's mindset.

4. From Indian Nationalism to the concept of Ummah (1908–1930)

سرزمیں دلي کي مسجود دل غم دیدہ ہے
ذرے ذرے میں لہو اسلاف کا خوابیدہ ہے

پاک اس اجڑے گلستاں کي نہ ہو کیونکر زمیں
خانقاہ عظمت اسلام ہے یہ سرزمیں

ہے اگر قومیت اسلام پابند مقام
ہند ہي بنیاد ہے اس کي ، نہ فارس ہے ، نہ شام

In his 1909 correspondences, Allama Muhammad Iqbal articulated a critical shift in his political philosophy, arguing that Hindus

and Muslims should preserve their distinct national identities rather than pursue a combined Indian nationalism.
His explicit political warning about the division between Hindus and Muslims during my
this exact year was written to Munshi Ghulam Qadir Farrukh of Amritsar.

1908 to 1938: focus on self development
Realization that Muslims and Hindus were two separate entities
Iqbal explains his shift from Indian nationalism to panislamism, and then championed the cause for a separate homeland for IndianMuslims in his famous speech on 12/29/1930 at Allahabad.
چین و عرب ہمارا ہندوستاں ہمارا
مسلم ہیں ہم وطن ہے سارا جہاں ہمارا
The change in his focus did not go well with everyone. Some leading Muslim scholars of that period opposed Iqbal's ideas.
Iqbal's voice grew louder and stronger.

اے مرد خدا تجھ کو وہ قوت نہیں حاصل
جا بیٹھ کسی غار میں اللہ کو کر یاد
ملا کو جو ہے ہند میں سجدے کی اجازت
ناداں یہ سمجھتا ہے کہ اسلام ہے آزاد

He was much more scathing in his criticism of Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani

عجم هنوز نداند رموز دین، ورنه
ز دیوبند حسین احمد! این چه بوالعجبی است
سرود بر سر منبر که ملت از وطن است
چه بی‌خبر ز مقام محمد عربی است
به مصطفی برسان خویش را که دین همه اوست
اگر به او نرسیدی، تمام بولهبی است

.5 Why Did Iqbal Reject Territorial Nationalism?

He first talks about Islam's role as a chief formative factor in the life-history of the Muslims, especially in India, and then elaborates upon the Lutheran movement that

eventually, and perhaps unintentionally, separated religion and state in Europe.

“It cannot be denied that Islam, regarded as an ethical ideal plus a certain kind of polity – by which
expression I mean a social structure regulated by a legal system and animated by a specific ethical ideal –
has been the chief formative factor in the life-history of the Muslims of India. It has furnished those basic
emotions and loyalties which gradually unify scattered individuals and groups, and finally transform them
into a well-defined people, possessing a moral consciousness of their own. Indeed it is not an exaggeration to say that India is perhaps the only country in the world where Islam, as a people-building
force, has worked at its best. In India, as elsewhere, the structure of Islam as a society is almost entirely

due to the working of Islam as a culture inspired by a specific ethical ideal. What I mean to say is that
Muslim society, with its remarkable homogeneity and inner unity, has grown to be what it is, under the
pressure of the laws and institutions associated with the culture of Islam."
Major themes of his introductory remarks are:

- Islam as ethical ideal
- Islam as polity
- Islam as civilization

Why European Nationalism Developed
Iqbal now turns to Europe.
Young Muslims, he says, admire European political ideas like nationalism and democracy without understanding how they arose.
He explains that Europe's history was very different from Islam's.

Luther's Reformation

Iqbal says Martin Luther rebelled against the medieval Catholic Church because the Church had become a powerful institution controlling religious life.
Since Christianity never possessed an integrated political system comparable to Islam's, Luther's revolt naturally weakened the Church's authority.

Rousseau
Later thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized popular sovereignty and the nation.
Together these movements produced modern European nationalism.
Political loyalty shifted from:
Christendom
to
France, Germany, Italy, England, etc.

Iqbal's concern
He believes something valuable was lost.
Instead of universal moral brotherhood,

Europe became divided into competing nations.
National ethics replaced universal ethics.
Religion Became Private

6. From Muslim Autonomy to Pakistan (1930–1938)

Iqbal argues that once Europe separated religion from politics, religion gradually became merely a private matter.
Government, law, economics, and politics became secular.
Religion was confined to churches and individual conscience.

Explanation
This reflects the modern liberal state.
Today we might summarize it as:

- religion belongs in private life
- politics belongs in public life

Iqbal says this development was understandable for Christianity because

Christianity never developed a complete legal-political civilization.
But Islam is fundamentally different. A disconnect between religion and state is destructive.

جلال پادشاہی ہو کہ جمہوری تماشا ہو
جدا ہو دیں سیاست سے تو رہ جاتی ہے چنگیزی

Ayesha Jalal and the two nation theory:
In her book The struggle for Pakistan, Ayesha Jalal writes:
"Unlike Rahmat Ali's scheme for a separate and sovereign "Pakistan" linked to smaller sovereign Muslim polities in the rest of India's Iqbal's Muslim state was to remain part of the subcontinental whole. Ruling out any physical division, Iqbal called "India…..the greatest Muslim country in the world."
The centralization of the Muslim majority provinces of Punjab, Sindhi, the NWFP, and balochistan, whose military and police services were indispensable to British rule,

would “eventually solve the problems of India as well as of Asia.”
She mentioned that Iqbal’s scheme ignored Muslims living in the northeast and the Hindu majority provinces.
The genealogy of two nation theory
Sir Syed Ahmad khan has come to be seen as the founding father but according to Ayesha Jalal this is a historical distortion flowing from Sir Syed’s resolute opposition to Muslim participation in congress and efforts to convince the British to treat Muslims on the basis of their political significance rather than their numbers.
She claims that even Jinnah’s need to invoke the idea of Muslim distinctiveness was also based on political and not religious opposition to the congress. He was incensed by Jawahar Lal Nehru’s call to disband the Muslim league and join congress after the 1937 elections.
While Iqbal did not initially demand a separate Muslim state, he later shifted his stance to demand a completely separate

federation of Muslim sovereign states between 1936 and 1937. He articulated this final vision through a series of historic, confidential letters sent to Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Why Iqbal Changed His Mind
Iqbal's transition from advocating provincial autonomy within India to demanding outright secession was driven by profound political, economic, and ideological shifts:

1. Failure of the Government of India Act (1935)
The British introduced the Government of India Act 1935 to establish a centralized Indian Federation. Iqbal quickly realized this framework would trap Muslims under permanent, central Hindu-majority rule. In a letter to Jinnah on June 21, 1937, he wrote: "To my mind the new constitution with its idea of a single Indian federation is

completely hopeless. A separate federation of Muslim provinces... is the only course..."

2. The Rise of Aggressive Hindu Nationalism
The 1937 provincial elections saw a sweeping victory for the Indian National Congress. The subsequent formation of Congress ministries in Hindu-majority provinces triggered deep anxiety. Iqbal witnessed the implementation of cultural policies (such as the Wardha education scheme and the enforcement of Hindi) that he believed aimed to absorb or erase Muslim identity within a unitary Hindu state.

3. Solving Extreme Muslim Poverty Through Sharia
Iqbal shifted his focus from elite political representation to the economic survival of the Muslim masses. He argued that the severe poverty plaguing Indian Muslims could only be solved by enforcing Islamic economic justice (Sharia). In a letter dated May 28,

1937, he told Jinnah that enforcing Islamic law was impossible without a "free Muslim state or states". He also explicitly rejected Jawaharlal Nehru’s atheistic socialism as a viable solution for Muslims.

4. The Realization of Non-Coexistence (Two-Nation Theory)
By 1937, Iqbal concluded that Hinduism and Islam were not merely distinct religions, but two entirely incompatible social systems. He came to believe that forcing them into a single democratic country would inevitably trigger a bloody civil war.
What would have been Iqbal’s idea of Pakistan’s constitution?
It’s a difficult question to answer.
Ayesha Jalal mentions:
“Religion was too important to be left to men with half-baked knowledge of Islam.

اے مسلمان! اپنے دل سے پُوچھ، مُلاّ سے نہ پوچھ
ہوگیا اللہ کے بندوں سے کیوں خالی حرم

O Muslim ask your own heart, don't ask the mullah.
Why has the sacred sanctuary been emptied of God's men
Leaving matters of state in the hands of such ignoramus was out of the question. In Iqbal view, the only purpose of state in Islam was to establish a "spiritual democracy
" by implementing the principles of equality, solidarity, and freedom that constituted the essence of the Quranuc message. It was in "this sense alone that the State in Islam is a theocracy, not in the sense that it was headed by a representative of God on earth who can always screen his despotic will behind his supposed infallibility." (Reconstruction)
Similarly after independence the Quaid-e-Adam urged the constituent assembly to frame the constitution of Pakistan on the Islamic principles of democracy, equality, justice, and fair play for all.

In his address to the Karachi bar association on January 25, 1948m the Quaid said: “ What reason is there for anyone to fear democracy, equality, freedom….as the highest standard of integrity and on the basis of fair play and justice for everybody.”

Conclusion

Iqbal's political vision cannot be understood apart from his poetic imagination or his religious philosophy. His journey from Indian patriot to advocate of Muslim political autonomy was neither sudden nor contradictory. It was the culmination of more than thirty years of reflection on identity, religion, civilization, and history. The poet became the philosopher; the philosopher became the political visionary. And, above all, an idea became a country.
However, the post partition events took a different turn pitching the religious authorities against the elected governments.

I her book struggle fro Pakistan Ayesha Jalal gives a critical analysis of the ambiguity surrounding the 1949 Objectives Resolution, and the impact it left behind, specifically on the minorities.
Iqbal's Islamic political vision cannot simply be equated with rule by the ulema.
And this, interestingly, is precisely the distinction that Jalal sees embedded in the Objectives Resolution: Islamic principles without clerical sovereignty.